

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INITIATES WIND DEVELOPMENT & ECONOMIC DIVERSITY IN

GRATIOT COUNTY, MICHIGAN – September, 2011

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The development of commercial-grade wind energy in Gratiot County is both an extension of a multi-decade, continually evolving countywide collaborative engagement and the impetus for expanding collaborative activity at the county level and at a wider regional multicounty level. The locating of wind projects in Gratiot County is driving new personal and governmental revenues, spurring new opportunities, and fulfilling widely stated public goals.

The Gratiot community wind endeavor began over five years ago with an extensive effort to inform and educate all citizens, particularly the agricultural landowners, about the emerging commercial wind energy industry. The Gratiot wind story is best understood by explaining that the effort was not an individual or "stand alone" endeavor. The development now occurring in the northeast quarter of the county is the construction of the State's largest wind farm, Gratiot Wind LLC, which is owned jointly by Invenergy LLC and DTE Energy. The project required considerable effort by many: citizen groups, local municipalities, land owners, and developers all blended as an offshoot of the unique Gratiot countywide master planning project. Early in the countywide master planning effort it was determined that the planning commissions collectively participating would research what it would mean and what it would take to encourage the development of a viable wind industry. A large working group invited any who were interested to participate and make recommendations in two fundamental areas: first, would the wind industry fit and be appropriate for the Gratiot community? Second, (assuming an affirmative answer to #1) what local regulatory structure could be crafted to protect the interests of the community and allow a viable wind industry to develop?

The working group did conclude that the commercial-grade wind industry was an appropriate fit and collectively the participants drafted the significant points of a working ordinance. The information and recommendation was submitted to the planning commissions participating for consideration and inclusion in the master planning process. With the agreement that the Gratiot County Planning Commission would assume the lead role, a "master model wind ordinance" was crafted and adopted by the Gratiot County Commission. Subsequently the municipal units not covered by county zoning adopted the ordinance, which meant that the County now has one regulatory and permitting process. This simple, distinctive, and unique process ensured that Gratiot County was the easiest place in Michigan to develop a large scale wind farm.

The planning commissions representing the four host townships of the then proposed Gratiot Wind LLC project, Wheeler, Bethany, Emerson, and Lafayette (The Gratiot County Planning Commission addresses zoning for Lafayette), met jointly to address the request for a special use permit. This collaborative meeting allowed all interested citizens, land owners, and developers to interact, to hear one total

project explanation, and have all relevant questions raised and addressed. Over 300 people attended the joint meeting which was held in the Breckenridge High School gymnasium. Subsequently the joint meeting format has been used twice more to address special use permit requests for projects planned for the center and southwest areas of Gratiot County.

The entire county is now enthusiastically anticipating the Gratiot Wind LLC project going online as it means diversification of tax base, substantial new revenue and income, and fulfillment of widely agreed upon public goals. Projected local tax revenue from the Invenergy / DTE Energy project will approach \$1,500,000 in the first year and will be paid to township, county, and local school districts. Almost 250 farm families participating in the project area will proportionately share approximately \$1,200,000 in annually increasing revenue. This shared income approximates the payroll of a new 50 person industrial venture locating in the community. Not surprisingly, the connection of the new wind park to the larger electrical grid requires a substantial upgrade to the transmission lines serving the northern part of the county. As a consequence, the upgrades will further increase the tax base and dramatically improve reliability for the whole area. This will make Gratiot County an attractive location for business and industry requiring enhanced electrical reliability. Additionally, the location of the project necessitates the construction of a maintenance and operations center which will employ 15 skilled individuals. The need to construct a new facility has allowed the Village of Breckenridge to leverage the investment and construct Gratiot County's fifth industrial park. This park will be a Certified Business Park. The construction of an industrial park in Breckenridge is a long-standing Village goal and was adopted as a County goal on the Master Plan.

Perhaps the most long-term and beneficial impact of wind development for Gratiot County is the assistance in the fulfillment of the countywide Master Plan tenant: preservation of open space and agricultural production ground. All citizens in Gratiot County, rural and municipal, stated that preservation of open space and agricultural production ground was vital to the long-term interests of the County. With the placement of turbines farm families have diversified income, making agriculture more profitable and helping to ensure that land stays in production. As no other development may intrude upon the turbine setback areas, urban sprawl and miscellaneous development is limited. Truly, wind development in Gratiot County has proven a very successful community development option now and for the future.